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ABSTRACT

This article examines ways in which the school-linked integration of services can be provided to students and their families. The first section presents several points that illustrate the critical need for improving service delivery to families. The need is escalated due to faltering support services, increasing poverty among young families, reluctance of the aging population to value the needs of children, increasing costs of human service and education delivery, and an alarming number of at-risk children. The second section offers questions to consider when designing and implementing a more comprehensive school-linked services system, such as role definition, territorial and political issues, legal and policy issues, alignment of goals and philosophy, funding, planning, time, governance, location of services, intensity of services, and accountability. The third section outlines strategies for success, and the next section highlights reasons why the school is the logical intersection for the integration of services for children. In conclusion, the integration of services can enhance, rather than erode, local determination of policy, vision, accountability, and advocacy. (LMI)

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The school is a long standing institution within our local, state and national society. It is a microcosm of all that society represents, good and bad. Schools are the receivers of the children who are products of the family and society, and the responsible party for the end result. They are the perpetuators of the collective values and priorities of the culture, from the national to the local. Schools reflect reality, past, present and future.

The expectation that schools provide services to children beyond the academic arena has evolved gradually over the century as our society has recognized the many needs of our young people. This has not occurred in a deliberate and thoughtful fashion in many cases, but as "add on" services, such as school lunch and breakfast programs, health services, psychological services, guidance, social workers, day care and other programs unique to local communities throughout the country.

Currently, there is a shared responsibility for the education of children among the federal, state and local policy makers. This is acknowledged in many ways — through federal and state statutes; through federal, state and local funding streams; and through the policies adopted by these stakeholders. Yet formal schooling is but one aspect of a child's life, and his or her success is affected by a variety of outside factors currently beyond the influence of schools.

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Faltering Support Services

Child and family service agencies, usually within the domain of the state, subject to both state and federal regulations, and funded with both federal and state monies, are charged with dealing with the physical, mental, and emotional health of children and families through maternal and child health programs, child protective agencies, public health services, aid to families with dependent children, food stamp programs, mental-health services and corrections programs, among others.

There is increasing acknowledgment among schools and state agencies that the needs of children and families are not being met in an adequate fashion within the current patterns of service delivery. What we are doing now in schools, social services, and other youth serving agencies is not working adequately for too many children and families. It could easily be argued that the "territory" of each agency has been rendered unimportant, particularly when compared to the plight of the second grader who cannot learn because he justifiably fears his father will kill his mother while he is at school. This is the time, if there is to be an opportune moment, to incorporate the philosophy of child centeredness with the renewed emphasis on academic outcome, and to look in a new way at the roles of all parties who bear responsibility for the well being of children, present and future.

The Link-Up Leap

The consideration of a collaborative effort among all of those institutions who serve children, families, communities, and society seems a logical leap, given our common interest, our lack of effectiveness with many children while operating in isolation, and the unbearable consequences of missing the mark with generation after generation of children at risk.

There isn't one of us who, given a choice between success or failure, would choose to fail. The question is one of method or process. How can we be more successful with those children at greatest risk of failing educationally, and how can we protect those families and children who are at physical and emotional risk? At-risk children are a portion of our student population that is growing — we cannot afford to write them off. *Beyond Rhetoric, Final Report of the National Commission on Children*, 1991, stated "Many profound changes in American family life and society over the past generation are not likely to be reversed

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in the near future...they will continue into the next decade, even into the next century." We need to find a way to break into the cycle of parent socio-economic status as it correlates to student health, self esteem, aspirations, and achievement.

Consider the following points:

- Children's problems have not gotten better, despite all of our separate efforts within the traditional forms of delivery. The Children's Defense Fund in *Vanishing Dreams*, 1988, has said, "Poverty among children in young families has skyrocketed. In 1986, 35% of children in young families were poor, compared with 21% in 1973. Young families with children are seven times more likely to be poor than those without children" Economic pressures on the family, coupled with the weakening of support systems for children within the family unit, create greater burdens for schools both in terms of human and fiscal resources.
- As the proportion of children to adults in our society declines, there is even greater risk of "comfortable adults" taking care of their own needs and devaluing the needs of children. (Recently, in a school district in Maine with a significant retired population, the only warrant item on the school budget referendum which received voter support was that item which funded adult education. The adults took care of their needs, seemingly turning their backs on the children.)
- Costs of delivery of education and human services support have increased, while adequate funding of both efforts seems increasingly impossible to gain. Often those school districts with the least fiscal capacity are those with the greatest number of needy students and families. In many school units, special needs students are claiming larger and larger portions of school budgets.
- Tough economic pressure on schools create a jeopardy for programs perceived as "social" by the public (guidance programs, school social workers, school psychologists, school breakfast and lunch programs, etc.), i.e., not central to the educational mission of the schools.
- Children with serious emotional and physical needs which go unmet cannot effectively learn or participate fully in the life of the school and their community, and can create serious classroom disruption, thus diminishing the educational opportunity for all children. "Twelve percent of American Children - more than 450,000 additional children each year — suffer developmental damage (low birth weight, maternal smoking, prenatal alcohol exposure, parental exposure to drugs, lead poisoning, child abuse and neglect, malnutrition) that causes learning problems." (Educational Leadership, 9/91) Schools, as well as other providers, are often least effective with those with the greatest need.
- We have significant numbers of pregnant and parenting teens. "Teenage pregnancies are a big contributor to single-parent situations for children — more than 11% of female adolescents age 15 - 19 became teenage mothers in 1980. The rate is just slightly lower now." (Principal, 9/91)
- Schools traditionally receive children at about the age of five. Serious problems can already exist at this early age, and there is inadequate attention to prevention even though remediation is far less effective and far more expensive than prevention. Schools must deal with the result of this neglect of preventive intervention, but they have limited ability to affect a change in human service focus toward this end. It is the human service agencies that have access to children virtually from birth, and with which education needs to be interacting.
- Individually, do we have the power or the potential to develop human, institutional, and fiscal capacity to successfully address the problems of children and families? "One in five American children between ages 3 and 17 is reported by parents to have had a developmental delay, learning disability, or behavioral problem during childhood. Children from single parent families are two to three times as likely to suffer these problems as children living with both parents." (*Beyond Rhetoric, Final Report of the National Commission on Children*, 1991) Can we afford to continue our separate efforts, in the hope of a funding or human "miracle"?

The Bounds of Reality

For schools entering into collaborative efforts to integrate services for children, there are many potential barriers to success. However, far from being a

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permanent blocker, a barrier can be a reality check, a test of commitment, an opportunity to assess and modify; and ultimately overcoming such impediments can create a reaffirmation of the ultimate goal.

These are some questions and issues you may want to consider:

- Do you concentrate your energy on students, or do children and families get equal consideration within the services link? (Most successful programs are family-oriented.)
- What sort of pre-conceived definitions of "collaboration" currently exist in the consciousness of the parties who provide services?
- What is the role for each collaborator? (There is the real possibility of over-domination by the school, because they have daily access to children and good data available on students. This role can alienate other parties, and may result in new roles being viewed as primarily a school responsibility rather than a community responsibility — back where we started!)
- Do you form initial alliances based on services presently accessed by children and families, or do you begin with a needs assessment? Do you have the capacity to "reinvent the wheel?"
- Will you include YMCA, YWCA, and other youth serving organizations?
- Will you include child care for both the after-school latch key children and the children of students?
- What are the territorial issues? Is the ground you are standing on solid and defensible, or are you "straddling a crevasse" simply because it is familiar? Some parties may fear that collaboration could be the beginning of their demise as institutions. (In reality it may be the key to their survival — the true demonstration of their abilities, potential, leadership and understanding of the needs of children and families.)
- There is the reality of politics. Reaching a political consensus will be a great challenge, but the acknowledgment up front that this is a somewhat political issue is necessary for the process to proceed within the bounds of reality!
- There are legal and policy issues to be resolved at all levels, particularly regarding confidentiality and professional credentialing requirements for new roles. We need to define what are regulatory issues and what are supportive issues. States have a regulatory, as well as supportive, responsibility within the human services function. How can that be integrated with the school's primary educational responsibility? What legal and policy adjustments are possible? Coordination and coherence across institutions is essential. Before these new policy and legal questions can be facilitated politically, we should ask if we need to enhance public understanding and support for effective integration of services? How does each agency view its leadership role in this process?
- Is total alignment of goals and philosophy among participating institutions necessary to begin? Can it be approached with a "baby steps" attitude?
- Funding issues. Will there be a source of new funds, a mingling of funds, or redirected funds? Will it be publicly funded; will you pursue grants; will you establish a foundation? (It is important to realize that personal and professional investment can be facilitated and ensured by financial commitment.) School boards have an advantage here as all school funds flow through the school board. The school board is the governing authority that can direct fiscal resources to address clear goals reflective of community values and needs. The school board is the governing body closest to the people. State social service agencies frequently deal with categorical funding — they do not have the flexibility to direct or redirect funds to greater needs, or to prevention versus crisis-oriented remediation/intervention.
- Planning. Diversity of experience and role levels will facilitate the understanding of the roles of policy, delivery, and decision making. All links in the "chain of command" must be accessible to all collaborators. Critical cross-cultural skills and skills of tact and diplomacy will smooth the path. Curious and open-minded participants will be more likely to explore alternative paths.
- Time. The planning of a new and complex collaborative is a path with no good short cut. Realistic and adequate time lines must be created and adjustments made when need is indicated.
- The issue of the governance structure of the new collaborative and its responsibilities must be debated and resolved. Do you want the integration of services to be formal, or are informal partnerships sufficient in your particular community?
- Location of services. Is it the school or some neutral location? If the site is the school, and services are perceived as institutionalized within the school, will schools end up with the greatest part of the human and fiscal responsibility? Is the school the *intersection of services* or the *destination*?
- Sufficient intensity of services. If critical needs are not addressed, your entire collaboration will be undermined. Identify and deal with the most critical needs first.

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- Outcome focused and accountable. What assessment of effectiveness will you use? How will you employ the results of this assessment to improve services? Be flexible. Do thorough long-term follow ups. (Too often we embrace innovations, only to discover that the student has realized no sustained benefit from them.)

Strategies for Success

There are many ways to overcome these and other barriers which may surface in the effort to create a more comprehensive school-linked services system for children and families. The end product of this collaboration will look and function differently from community to community. That is as it should be.

Some possible strategies for success include:

- Identify potential agencies, institutions and organizations for the integration of services.
- Begin with a mutual acknowledgment and acceptance that we can do far better for children and families. The reason for collaboration must be powerful enough to drive the expenditure of energy. Through this linkage of effort, we can build on strengths and compensate for weaknesses.
- Understand that individual personalities and relationships are a powerful force in determining the degree of success of the effort. The development of a process does not replace relationships.
- Recognize that what is good for children and families is the bottom line. Issues of territory and personal ego must be resolved. The collaborators must begin to discover what has meaning for children and families, and what has meaning only for them. This may well require the assistance of a "critical friend," someone without a foot in anyone's territory. (Consultants can be helpful, but their role should be limited. Beware of over-reliance on consultants — they are not the policy makers. They may have a particular expertise, but neither the problem nor the solution is theirs; they can walk away and leave you to deal with it. If the plan is not yours, it will not work.)
- Leadership from the top is critical but not exclusive of collaboration.
- Build local community involvement with all family agencies, political leaders, business people, parents, students, school personnel — anyone with the ability or potential to assist in the success or facilitate the failure! The collaboration should be able to respond to the diversity of children and families. Take care that the planning and implementation is not perceived to be dominated by any one entity.
- Seek agreement that each person involved is responsible for "selling" the program politically, philosophically, financially, etc. Clear understanding of the central mission and goals, common vision, and commitment must exist to achieve your objectives.
- Plan generous time for phasing in the collaborative services.
- Allow adequate time and funding for appropriate training of providers.
- Consider peer providers for some services.
- Ensure accurate assessment of need and appropriate response in terms of program development.
- Create a multi-representative governance structure. In essence, create new "turf" based only upon concern for bettering the conditions of children and families.
- Develop appropriate and understandable accountability. Share the responsibility and the credit.

The School as the Services Intersection

The benefits to individuals, institutions, and communities from collaborative efforts can be great. Why should the school be the logical intersection for integration of services for children?

- Experience shows "effective initiatives to change service delivery systems are school -linked." Refer to *Together We Can: A Guide for Crafting a Profamily System of Education and Human Services.*
- Schools are enduring and dominant community institutions. It is logical that they be the point for service linkage.
- Schools have daily contact with all children.
- Schools are child-centered.
- Schools can offer easy access for parents and children. The present service system in its fragmentation not only leaves yawning gaps in the safety net for children and families, it is often divided between many sites. The process of access is frequently so complicated, intimidating, and time-consuming for all parties that only the basics are addressed.
- Schools can provide access for children independent of parents. Children are already in school, they are comfortable with the environment, and they could self-refer.
- Schools can encourage the shift of responsibility for children back to communities. With that shift can come a greater sense of ownership of outcome, a sense of mutual obligation, and an understanding of the long term consequences of abdication. Presently, it is always the responsibility of someone else.
- Schools can facilitate cross-system communication and collaboration. We are all on the same team;

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building on the strengths of each is a better use of energy and expertise.

The Other Side

In fairness, there are arguments presented by some against the linking of services for children through schools. Some see schools as rigid and rife with institutional bias. The disenfranchised of our society are often uncomfortable in schools and will not accept that schools are sincerely concerned with their welfare.

Many say that schools are already overburdened and should not be doing as much as they are doing now. The values of the school community (staff, PTA, school board, etc.) may not correspond/relate with the social/educational/economic spheres of many children and families.

The Policy Perspective

The creation of a system of integrated services for children will require a great deal of schools, and most particularly of the local school board as the policy makers. It will necessitate a thorough audit of present policies to flag those with potential to affect goals positively or negatively. These policies will run the gamut from student discipline to governance responsibility. Old policies may need to be reworked, and in some cases discarded. New policies will have to be adopted to provide for the creation and support of the new collaboration and its governance structure. It is vital that this policy link be created, for it is through policy that this new entity will be shaped, governed, assessed, and supported.

Integration of services for children (and families) can enhance, rather than erode, local determination of policy, vision, accountability, and advocacy. It can make the goal of increased educational opportunity for children and enhancement of their capacity to benefit from such an opportunity a reality, rather than an illusive ideal. ■

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